Protecting surf in the national parks

by Rebecca Beavers and Adam Stein

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Surfers congregate at the end of a seawall at the Sandy Hook, New Jersey, unit of Gateway National Recreation Area. A recreational resource, the focused wave energy threatens to erode the shoreline and park access road. Through careful planning the National Park Service protected park infrastructure in 2002 without adversely affecting surfing.

IN MANY REGIONAL SURFING CIRCLES, NATIONAL parks are synonymous with excellent surfing. Cape Hatteras, Cape Canaveral, and Gulf Islands National Seashores have abundant opportunities that draw thousands of surfers each year. Ocean Beach in Golden Gate National Recreation Area and Malibu in Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area are two of the numerous West Coast locations visited by many of California's 600,000 surfers. As a recreational resource, surf is of primary importance to surfers and surf-related visitors. But it also influences the aesthetic experience of many other park visitors and in some cases is culturally significant. Unfortunately the locations, characteristics, and threats to surfing areas in the national parks have not been well documented. The National Park Service has begun to gather information on this valuable natural asset in order to enhance its protection.

In 2002 the NPS Geoscientists-in-the-Parks program and the Surfrider Foundation jointly funded an inventory of surfing resources in the National Park System. This project included surfing locales or breaks from the Great Lakes to American Samoa and identified 85 surfing spots in 25 separate national park units, with 28 units still under study. The inventory documented the type, season, and level of use of each area, along with management issues that could affect the surf. It also identified surfing resources with major cultural significance or especially high levels of use. Many parks were unfamiliar with their surf breaks and will benefit from the findings, such as digital data, which will be reported to managers in 2003. The information will be easily applicable to park management issues because the data will also be made available in a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) database.

A recent case study at Sandy Hook in Gateway National Recreation Area illustrates how one park dealt effectively with a management problem involving a prized surfing resource. The surf in "Big Cove" is the result of a lengthy New Jersey seawall that extends into the southern boundary of the park, producing waves that are enjoyed by surfers. However, this focused wave energy threatens to erode the shoreline along the only road accessing northern portions of the park and other infrastructure. In developing plans to protect this critical area, park staff reviewed shoreline monitoring data on the erosion problem and discussed management options with surfing organizations. The combination of open communication and scientific information enabled the park to make an informed decision that benefited all parties. In 2002 the park replenished beach sand to protect park infrastructure, but in small enough quantities and at a distance far enough away from the surf break to ensure its preservation. Russ Wilson, superintendent of the Sandy Hook unit, summed up the positive outcome. "Through an open dialogue … we have made several changes in the design to the interim beachfill project…. We are pleased that we could work together to design a project to satisfy the needs of the National Park Service, while … working to minimize any potential adverse effect on surfing." ■

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Surfers enjoy a breaker at Assateague Island National Seashore, one of at least 25 units in the National Park System with significant surfing resources. An ongoing survey of surfing areas in the national parks is developing information for management of this recreational park resource.